

THE FEATHER SERIES AND REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORATION IS THE PROCESS OF ART AND TEACHING

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Over the past two semesters I have explored the medium of drawing through a series of large-scale charcoal and graphite drawings of feathers. What started as small, delicate pencil drawings of feathers have evolved into large drawings adapted from photographs that I have taken. My artwork has become an exploration in a number of drawing elements. The feather serves as a vehicle to explore charcoal and pencil interacting with the paper, the paper interacting with the image, and the image interacting with its shadow. I was drawn to the feather because the more I observed the object, the more complex and interesting it became. I am interested in creating an appearance of layers and complexity with a simple medium, format, and object. The direction I am continuing my exploration in is the play between the paper being the background in some parts of the image, and the foreground in others. The relationship between these elements is subtle and delicate. It has captured my attention and I am working to deeply explore these elements and their interactions to create a viewing experience that reflects my own curiosity.

I want to create art that is interesting and captivating to experience viewing. This is an exploration in visual elements for me, and I want it to be a unique visual experience for my audience as well. I want the viewer to feel an interaction with the feather and its

complex visual nature, like I have. The size of the work is important, as it takes the viewer out of their normal frame of reference and allows them to notice more about the objects and the elements of drawing. Charcoal and graphite is a medium that is easily changed, smudged, or erased. This characteristic of the medium reflects a temporary feel of the image and adds an element of delicacy, which reflects the delicate nature of the feather itself.

Through my artistic practice I have learned that making art requires discipline and structure along with creativity and intuitive decision-making. I most often allow my intuitive nature to discover and explore a new image, process, or idea artistically. I cannot rely completely on my intuitive nature and must incorporate reflective writing, conversation, review of artists, and most importantly, a decision for the direction the work needs to go. I personally have to battle my indecisive nature and consider the strongest direction for the work. During the process of these drawings I have decided that focusing on the visual nature and elements of these drawings was most important to my growth as an artist and the strongest part of the drawings.

Much like my drawings are an exploration in the creative process and an exploration in the relationship of a number of elements, there is a similar connection to my teaching practice. I have heard teaching described as “an art,” or a career that only certain people are born to do. I have to disagree with that attitude as I now understand teaching to contain creative developments along with structured techniques to be the most successful. During my undergraduate practice and student teaching experiences I was told that I was a “natural in front of a classroom.” Though I did not decide to go into education until it was time to choose a major, and I never thought of myself as a typical

teacher, I did immediately love being in front of a classroom and working with individual students. I knew very quickly that teaching art was enjoyable, fulfilling, creative, challenging, and a career in which I would be successful. This intuitive connection and success in teaching is similar to my intuitive attraction towards art and towards visual elements and images.

Though I was initially comfortable with teaching, I always viewed it as a practice that should be open for continuous learning, understanding, and improvement. In order to have a successful classroom, a teacher cannot rely entirely on a strong classroom presence. Over my four years of teaching practice and my current graduate study in art education, I have worked to gain knowledge and understanding of many elements of education, teaching, and art education. I now understand that my role in the school community, my understanding of the outside community, my relationship with students, my relationship with fellow teachers and staff, my curriculum, my classroom management, my personal content knowledge, my assessment practices, my understanding of child development, my presence and leadership in the class and in the school, my expectations of students, and my personal reflection are all integral parts of a successful classroom and that there is always room to grow in each of the elements.

For my thesis I will continue to develop my current drawings and create new ones to complete the series. These new drawings will stem from the same process and interest as the current ones, but will be completed with more direction and a place in the body of work. I will also continue to develop my relationship between my teaching practice and artistic practice. I hope to gain understanding of the areas in both practices so that I can

continue to learn and develop as I move from beginner teacher and artist to a more experienced and successful art educator.

INTRODUCTION

My current body of artwork, *The Feather Series*, is the result of a continuous observation of a simple object. What started as a feather found in my backyard has turned into an intense inspection of the structure of a delicate object and the relationship with: its shadow, the paper, the charcoal, and the viewer. I have been captured by the feather's strong spine, delicate softness, ambiguous shadow, and ability to turn and move in many ways.

The feather has served as a vehicle for exploration in a number of visual elements and my own intuitive attraction to visual subtleties. I have explored my visual sensitivity to subtle changes in light, shadows, line, and shape. I find myself lost in elusive changes found in shadows and quiet places. The meaning of the feather and my relationship to it has continued to evolve and take many forms as I have worked with it. I make art that reflects my own instinctual attraction to such visual objects and reflects care and delicacy in unexpected places and objects. I hope for viewers to find their own observations and interests in the feather, perhaps their own meaning, and to experience the object in a new context.

My teaching practice has continued to evolve in new ways: by exploring a deeper understanding of large and subtle education issues, considering how the parts of a classroom and school must work and balance together, and practicing constant reflection. There is no doubt in my mind that teaching and art making require similar creative and reflective processes, and both require a diligent work ethic that balance together a number

of important elements. This written work reflects on the evolution and advancement of both my artistic and teaching practice.

ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

Over the course of nearly a year I have explored the medium of drawing through a series of large-scale charcoal and graphite drawings of feathers. What started as small, delicate pencil drawings of feathers has evolved into large drawings adapted from photographs that I have taken. My artwork has become an exploration in a number of drawing elements. The feather serves as a vehicle to explore charcoal and pencil interacting with the paper, the paper interacting with the image, and the image interacting with its shadow.

Like many artists, I find myself collecting clipped images from newspapers, magazines, discarded material, useless household objects, and found natural objects. At some point, I picked up a feather discarded in my backyard and placed it on a corkboard next to my desk along with numerous other found visuals. I was drawn to the feather because the more I observed the object, the more complex and interesting it became. One of the first observations that deeply intrigued me was how the individual quills appeared to look like individual feathers. I began making small, delicate pencil drawings that carefully portrayed the individual hair-like quills, thick spine, and soft uncontrollable bottom quills or “fluff,” as I like to call it. These drawings looked like botanical scientific drawings found in books and were very direct and based on strict observations. Through these first drawings and observations I was able to gain a significant understanding of the structure of the object. I was infatuated with how detailed such a simple object could be, and that the more I stared, the more I saw. As I began a graduate course in drawing, I

knew that I wanted to continue to explore this object and take my drawings to a new level.

I have been visually drawn to objects for a long time. I often take pictures of objects and I keep odd objects around my house that I've collected from different times in my life, including odd figurines, statues, cups, and old household objects from my grandmother's house, travels, and past residencies. In ways, objects have an ability to remind us of memories or express an aspect of our life, which is probably why we keep so many otherwise useless items. Visually, I am drawn to objects that not only hold personal meaning or reflect what I think of as my personality, but are simply interesting and engaging to view.

I am especially drawn to objects that are overlooked as simple but upon deeper inspection are complex or show subtle variations. During my first formal college painting class I was extremely interested in the changes in color and tone in shadows on objects, but I was also intrigued by folds, creases, bumps, and texture on the white cloth that covered on the still life table. I continued this interest in further painting classes where I simply painted folded and crumpled white sheets and pillows. My final undergraduate independent study exhibition consisted of a series of glazed photographs of a single paper towel taped to a wall and moving from a fan. I also began a series of photographs and drawings of my weekly white trash bag, propped against a white wall.

Upon beginning my first graduate drawing course in the fall of 2010, the first major change to my feather sketches was to create large drawings and focus on the fluffy obscure parts of the feather. With guidance and advice from my drawing instructor, I was pushed to explore more complex parts of the feather image. I began focusing on the softer

parts of the feather, but was also drawn to the ambiguity of the shadow of the feather. It intrigued me how a soft object created a soft shadow that was difficult to distinguish from the actual object. I continued this exploration and fascination with the delicate relationship of the object and the shadow by also pushing my ability to create the look of interacting visual layers.

Once I was deeply committed to drawing the feather on such a large scale, it was obvious that this needed to become a body of work, not just a single drawn work. Over the course of the next semester, I continued to explore the feather in new ways. At one point, I focused on only drawing the fluff, at another I explored the interaction with the shadow. Finally, I spent the weeks leading up to my exhibition exploring stronger composition and increasing the contrast between dark and light. These very basic design elements of composition and contrast were an important factor in making my final drawings more dramatic and full of stronger movement on the page. I spent the majority of my time exploring the medium and the object, and in the final weeks was finally able to bring in simple design elements to help finish the series on a strong note.

The Feather Series is a result of a long exploration. The object captured my attention for its visual complexity. My exploration in a number of visual elements continues to present the opportunity to investigate the feather in new and creative ways. The addition of paper cutting and book arts took the large and strong drawings to a delicate and personal level. I am continually excited at the prospects of exploring not just the feather on another level, but continuing to mix paper, light, shape, shadows, and drawing in new and creative ways.

ARTISTIC EXPLANATION

The Feather Series expresses an interest in creating an appearance of complexity and layers through a simple medium, format, and object. The direction that I continued to explore is the play between the paper being the background in parts of the image, and the foreground in others, the interaction between the charcoal and the paper, and how the object and shadow rest and move on the paper. The relationship between these elements is subtle and delicate. It captured my attention and I worked to deeply explore these elements and their interactions to create a viewing experience that reflects my own curiosity.

The size of these drawings has served an important purpose. It takes the viewer out of their normal frame of reference and allows them to notice more about the objects and the elements of the drawing. It gives the soft and quiet feather a larger sense of importance and attraction. The size draws the viewer in from a distance and allows them to explore the larger object with the smaller details. Taking the feather drawings to a large scale instantly took the drawings to a more complex level.

Charcoal and graphite is a medium that is easily changed, smudged, or erased. These characteristics enable an ephemeral feel to the image and adds an element of delicacy, which reflects the delicate nature of the feather itself. Much of my personal reflection is based on this phenomena. Though my relationship and the meaning discovered through the feather evolved during this process, I have consistently been drawn to the delicate feeling of temperance with the work. It is not an overwhelming feeling of the series, but an underlying one. Though I do not look at this body of work as

a deep expression of my being, I do feel a connection to the transitory feeling of a delicate medium, body, and image at this transitory time in my personal life.

Since my college art experience I have tended to create artworks in a series where the format is the same, the materials are the same, the subject is the same, but the image is just slightly different. *The Feather Series* incorporates all of those qualities, which have become the strongest stylistic characteristics of my work. Perhaps I am drawn to working in a series format because I tend to work with unimportant everyday objects, and a large collection of unimportant objects feels important. A series of the same image also allows for a closer examination of small details and subtle differences in each of the images that might otherwise be overlooked.

The creative process surrounding *The Feather Series* led me to three contemporary artists whose work resonated with my motivation for the series. Gerhard Richter creates a distance from his subjects by blurring his photographic paintings. These paintings depict recognizable everyday subjects, yet they are made in a ghostly look, creating a void between the viewer and the work. *The Feather Series* is far from ghostly, but I am drawn to Richter's ability to question reality and how we perceive everyday images. There is a part of my artistic awareness that desires to question how images are viewed and perceived.

Bill Jacobson's blurred, foggy photographs also draw a close connection to my interest in the out-of-focus image. Like Richter, Jacobson is exploring perception and awareness of images and our interaction with the visual world. A crucial element of *The Feather Series* is the blurred, ambiguous shadow interacting and not distinguishing from the actual parts of the feather.

Though her work is vastly different than mine, I learned considerable lessons exploring the development of Louise Bourgeois' work. Her exaggerated story of her emotionally abusive father is often brought up as her own major influence; but I explored her development from a printmaker to a sculptor, and her artistic maturity from the 1940's to the 1980's. I learned many lessons from Bourgeois and her artwork. Most notable, Bourgeois understood how an artwork's scale will have an impact on the interaction with the viewers. While she emphasized the story of her father along with her artwork to build an emotional atmosphere, the images she conveys are body parts, household objects, or figures that already convey intense amounts of emotion. I am drawn to Bourgeois' ability to create large amounts of emotion, and connection to a wide range of audience viewers. From my study of Bourgeois, I better understood the idea of connecting viewers to the artwork by building relationships. The human scale sizes of *The Feather Series* is an important element, and builds a different relationship with the viewer than if the feathers were actual sizes.

I cannot write about my artistic influences without mentioning the impact of Chinese landscape painting. Landscape painting, specifically during the *Song* dynasty, utilized tremendously subtle expressions, conveyed large distances through the use of blurred outlines and mountain contours disappearing into the mist, and applied negative space as an important element. In a simple format, the landscapes convey large powerful places, and quiet reflection at the same time. The elusive tones and lines are soft and strong in the same stroke. The result is a captivating, spiritual, mysterious, and ephemeral experience, and *The Feather Series* along with my previous work is affected and directed by this type of art.

Through my artistic practice I have learned that making art requires discipline and structure along with creativity and intuitive decision-making. Although intuition is the basis of much of my initial artistic inspiration, I cannot rely completely on my intuitive nature. I must incorporate reflective writing, conversation, review of artists, and most importantly a decision on the direction the works needs to go. I personally battle my indecisive nature and have difficulties considering the strongest direction for the work given many choices. During the process of these drawings I decided that focusing on the visual nature and elements of these drawings was most essential to my growth as an artist and the strongest part of the drawings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Much like my drawings are an exploration in the creative process and an exploration in the relationship of a number of visual elements, there is a similar connection to my teaching practice. I have come to understand best teaching practices to involve creative developments and reflection along with structured techniques, balance, and organization. Through my four years of professional teaching and reflection upon such teaching, during my graduate studies, I have been able to build a stronger understanding and gain confidence in visioning a successful classroom and working as an integral part of a school and a child's education. I strive to be a teacher who not only knows their materials and successfully organizes their classroom, but is able to understand and build connections between curriculum and the individual students. As an art education graduate student, I explored my personal interests within in both fields of art and education. The door was open for me to choose issues and subjects that interest me personally. I chose to study a wide variety of education topics, and carefully selected a number of artists and art media to explore.

Much like I am drawn to visual objects that display subtle differences, I am interested in education subjects that require close observation of subtle differences. I am interested in child development, gender roles and stereotypes in children, and questioning policies that are controversial. I believe I am drawn to gray areas, both visually and socially. I am interested and amazed at how much a child or adolescent can change intellectually over the course of time, or with a single outside influence to their development. I am drawn to observing and highlighting gender roles and stereotypes in

children since often people are unaware of their presence and influence on a child and their artistic expression. Observing and understanding a student on a personal level and seeing the small subtle influences on their lives allows me to develop and relate curriculum in the most meaningful way. I learned this simple lesson through studying this wide range of educational influences both as a classroom teacher and through research projects throughout my M.A.Ed. degree.

CONCLUSION

The Feather Series is the longest body of artwork that I have created to date. The numerous papers written for education, psychology, and art history classes are the most in depth writings I have written to date. While I am deeply proud of the amount of work created during my Master's degree, the size, length, and scale feels mildly successful and somewhat trivial at the same time. I am more impressed with my own depth of understanding and ability to immerse myself into topics and areas of art education chosen precisely for my own personal growth. After completing a lengthy body of artwork and academic writings I am confident in my own ability to move forward with my art education practice and perform at a much higher level of achievement.

I use the term "art education practice" to bring together my practice of art making and art teaching. I strive to be an art educator, a strange blend of both artist and teacher, balancing between the two different positions. In both art classes and education classes I have always felt slightly out of place, holding a somewhat different motive and goal than the other students, and gleaning information in a slightly different manner. Being both an artist and teacher requires strong conviction and rigorous work that conflict at times. The opportunity to study both practices in-depth has allowed me to become a more diligent practitioner in both, and find many connections and personal work habits to create a balance.

In order to function at high levels, both artist and teacher roles require stability of various components within the roles. *The Feather Series* taught me not only to create a lengthy body of work, but to develop and understand my own creative process.

Understanding my personal creative process allows me to understand the creative process of curriculum development and the practice of organizing and running a successful classroom. I am more aware of the elements and parts of the classroom that must interact properly in order for time to be maximized on learning and creating art. I understand the correlation between curriculum standards, individual student needs, school policy and structure, teacher collaboration, time and classroom management systems, instruction delivery, student independent work, group discussion, and assessment as critical elements in a child's education. As an artist I am better able to understand the connection during the creative process of intuitive interest and exploration, thoughtful observations, personal purpose, long-term and short-term goals, and personal reflection. Growing into this level of understanding and balance of my two roles as an art educator allows me to have more confidence and purpose as I begin the next chapter in my career as an art educator.

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